



Chapter 19



Moral Responsibility

Some philosophers deflect direct discussion of free will, primarily, no doubt, because of the scandal that the problem has resisted progress for so long. They study free will indirectly and only as the “control condition” for moral responsibility.

In his four-volume collection of articles on free will, JOHN MARTIN FISCHER made this observation.

“Some philosophers do not distinguish between freedom and moral responsibility. Put a bit more carefully, they tend to begin with the notion of moral responsibility, and “work back” to a notion of freedom; this notion of freedom is not given independent content (separate from the analysis of moral responsibility). For such philosophers, “freedom” refers to whatever conditions are involved in choosing or acting in such a way as to be morally responsible.¹

MANUEL VARGAS agrees:

“It is not clear that there is any single thing that people have had in mind by the term “free will.” Perhaps the dominant characterization in the history of philosophy is that it is something like the freedom condition on moral responsibility. Roughly, the idea is that to be morally responsible for something, you had to have some amount of freedom, at some suitable time prior to the action or outcome for which you are responsible. That sense of freedom — whatever it amounts to — is what we mean to get at by the phrase “free will.” ... Although I think much of what I will say can be applied to other aspects of thinking about it, I will be primarily concerned with free will in its connection to moral responsibility, the sense in which people are appropriately praised or blamed.²

In the next chapter, I present arguments for *separating* free will from moral responsibility, just as my two-stage model of free will separates the “free” stage from the “will” stage.

1 Fischer (2005) v.I, p. xxiii

2 Fischer (2007) p. 128.



Indeed, I will go further and recommend that we separate “moral” from “responsibility.” The latter is a scientific empirical problem. The former is an ethical problem to be settled by moral philosophers and social scientists in a cultural context.

The focus on **moral responsibility** had a very specific starting point in the history of the free will problem, as we noted in Chapter 7 (see p. 115).

Peter Strawson Changed the Subject

Peter Strawson argued in 1962 that whatever the deep metaphysical truth on the issues of determinism and free will, people would not give up talking about and feeling moral responsibility - praise and blame, guilt and pride, crime and punishment, gratitude, resentment, and forgiveness.

These “reactive attitudes” were for Strawson more real than whether they could be explained by fruitless disputes about free will, compatibilism, and determinism. They were natural “facts” of our human commitment to ordinary inter-personal attitudes. He said it was “a pity that talk of the moral sentiments has fallen out of favour,” since such talk was “the only possibility of reconciling these disputants to each other and the facts.”

Strawson himself was optimistic that compatibilism could reconcile determinism with moral obligation and responsibility. He accepted the facts of determinism. He felt that determinism was true. But he was concerned to salvage the reality of our attitudes even for libertarians, whom he described as pessimists about determinism.

“What I have called the participant reactive attitudes are essentially natural human reactions to the good or ill will or indifference of others towards us, as displayed in their attitudes and actions. The question we have to ask is: What effect would, or should, the acceptance of the truth of a general thesis of determinism have upon these reactive attitudes? More specifically, would, or should, the acceptance of the truth of the thesis lead to the decay or the repudiation of all such attitudes? Would, or should, it mean the end of gratitude, resentment, and forgive-



ness; of all reciprocated adult loves; of all the essentially personal antagonisms?"³

Of course, from the earliest beginnings, the problem of “free will” has been intimately connected with the question of **moral responsibility**. Most of the ancient thinkers on the problem were trying to show that we humans have control over our decisions, that our actions “depend on us”, and that they are not pre-determined by fate, by arbitrary gods, by logical necessity, or by a natural causal determinism.

But to say that today “free will is understood as the control condition for moral responsibility” is to make a serious blunder in conceptual analysis and clear thinking. Free will is clearly a prerequisite for responsibility. Whether the responsibility is a moral responsibility depends on our ideas of morality.

Are only Moral Decisions Free?

To say that a decision cannot be free unless it is a moral decision, I regard as an ethical fallacy, but it has a long tradition in the history of philosophy.

Some ancients and medieval thinkers argued that freedom could be equated with morality. Men were free to do good. If they did evil, it was the influence of some nefarious power preventing them from doing good.

ARISTOTLE, IMMANUEL KANT, and others often describe humans as free when we do good, otherwise as slaves to our ignorance. Aristotle’s equation of “virtue as knowledge” claims that we do wrong only because we do not know the right.

Starting with his 1985 book, *Free Will and Values*, Robert Kane argued that important free choices (his Self-Forming Actions or SFAs) are those moral and prudential decisions that have not yet been narrowed down to an act of **self-determination**. He says that the agent does not have “all-things-considered” reasons to choose one rather than another.

But freedom is a physical question, insofar as it is based on arguments about determinism versus indeterminism. To be sure, the will is in part also a psychological/physiological question.

3 Strawson (1962) p. 10.



Responsibility is a causality question. Is the agent properly in the causal chain? Moral questions are not physical questions. To confound them is to connect ought with is.

Moral responsibility is a major field of ethics that can stand on its own without sophisticated attempts to deny the existence of free will. e.g., the sophistry of Frankfurt-type examples claiming to deny **alternative possibilities** and the ability to **do otherwise**.

Naturalism and Moral Responsibility

For some Naturalists, the equation of free will and moral responsibility is driven by their goal to eliminate what they see as unjust punishment, the result of a “culture of vengeance.” Their specious reasoning goes something like this - “If free will is required for moral responsibility, we can deny moral responsibility by denying free will.”

Equating free will with moral responsibility, then to use spurious arguments to deny free will, and thus to deny moral responsibility - in order to oppose punishment - is fine humanism but poor philosophy, and terrible science.

Naturalists seem to naively accept the ancient religious arguments that free will is an exclusive property of humans (some religions limit it to males, for example). One strand in the naturalist argument then is to say that humans are animals and so we lack free will.

It will be interesting to see naturalists react to the establishment of a biophysical basis for behavioral freedom in lower animals. This behavioral freedom is conserved and shows up in higher animals and humans as freedom of their wills, as we saw in Chapter 16.

So a refined view of naturalism would be to extend behavioral freedom to all animals. We no longer need defend an exceptional human nature.



Even If Determinism Were True

ALFRED MELE tells me that he and JOHN MARTIN FISCHER have agreed on the view that even if determinism were true, we would still have free will.⁴

This can be so for philosophers who have redefined free will as the control condition for **moral responsibility**. If the world is perfectly **pre-determined**, we might have no way to prove it, but we know that moral responsibility is a natural fact of life.

This hypothesis is just to agree with P. F. STRAWSON that even if determinism were true we would not give up the reactive attitudes of moral responsibility, so we can call it the Strawson/Fischer/Mele hypothesis.

In the next chapter, I argue strongly for the need to separate the free will problem from moral responsibility, in order to analyze it and understand it.

The Acquired Freedom of Self-Perfection

Mortimer Adler, in two-volume work, *The Idea of Freedom*, described three freedoms.⁵

One was his *Circumstantial Freedom of Self-Realization*.

This is voluntariness, Hobbes-Hume compatibilist **freedom of action**, Berlin's negative liberty.

Another was the *Natural Freedom of Self-Determination*.

This is Aristotle's "up to us," origination, alternative possibilities, the **libertarian** freedom of the will explained by my Cogito model.

The third was an *Acquired Freedom of Self-Perfection*.

This is becoming morally responsible. the acquired or learned knowledge needed to distinguish right from wrong, good from evil, true from false, etc.

This is the answer to MANUEL VARGAS' question "When do children acquire free will? See page 259 in the next chapter.

4 Personal communication

5 Adler (1958) pp. 127-135, and (1961) p. 225.

